

The modal verbs

A modal verb – can, may must, shall or will - is an auxiliary – it modifies the verb and expresses whether the action described is seen as plan, intention, necessity, possibility, prediction, permission etc. Modal verbs combine with verbs by leaving out the infinitive mark: *at* (to): *Min telefon **kan sende og modtage** e-mail.* (My phone can send and receive e-mail).

The match between Danish and English modal verbs is poor, which makes word to word translation impossible, the major obstacles are:

- **Same word for must and may**

Must and *may* often translate into the same word: *må*: *Du må godt tage min bil i aften.* (You may take my car tonight) *Du må gå nu.* (You must leave now.)

- **Future expressed without modal verb**

Future in Danish is usually expressed with present, not with *vil* (*will*).
Han kommer klokken tre i morgen. (He will come at three o'clock tomorrow)

- **More modal verbs in one phrase**

Modal verbs can combine in Danish: *Du **skal kunne** tale dansk for at få jobbet.* (You **must be able to** speak Danish in order to get the job).

- **Perfect forms of the modal verbs**

The Danish modal verbs form present perfect and past perfect like other verbs:

Jeg har kunnet tale tysk engang, men nu har jeg glemt det meste.
(Once I spoke German, but now I have forgotten most of it.)

- **Transport verb left out: “No go”!**

In Danish transport verbs are left out after modal verbs – unless it is important how the transport is carried out: *Jeg skal til Århus.* (I am going to Århus) but: *Denne gang skal jeg **flyve** til Århus.* (This time I am going to Århus by plane.)

Declination of the modal verbs

Infinitive	present	past	present perfect
At ville	vil	ville	har villet
At skulle	skal	skulle	har skullet
At måtte	må	måtte	har måttet
At kunne	kan	kunne	har kunnet
At burde	bør	burde	har burdet

Ville

Ville expresses 1) a want, 2) an intention (or a demand) 3) an opinion or a prediction. *Ville* is subjective – the intention or opinion etc. has not been planned or agreed upon – it is more feeling than fact. When used about a future situation, *vil* describes where the inner laws will take things.

- 1) Jeg vil gerne have en øl. (I want a beer)
- 2) Jeg vil løbe et maraton inden jeg bliver 40! (I intend to run a marathon before I turn 40)
- 3) Kierkegaard vil være for svær for dig nu - prøv noget Disney!
(Kierkegaard will be too difficult for you by now – try some Disney!)

PLEASE NOTICE

Ville is not used for describing future actions unless you want to underline intention or opinion/prediction (with some uncertainty):

Han kommer klokken tre. (He will come at 3 o'clock)

Jeg tror, at han vil være her klokken 3. (I guess he will be here by 3 o'clock)

Skulle

Skulle expresses 1) a plan, system, suggestion, instruction or agreement, 2) –usually with *nok* - a promise/ an assurance 3) the pattern behind a behaviour , 4) a common opinion or 5) a feared scenario

Skulle is objective – it presents the content as a fact.

1. Jeg skal i mudderbad i dag – det skulle du også prøve engang!
(I will be having a mud bath today – you should try it!)

2. Du skal nok blive god til dansk.
(You will be good in Danish, I can assure you)

3. Hvorfor skal du altid bøvse, mens vi spiser?
(Why do you always have to belch during the meals)

4. Jeg har hørt, at H.C. Andersen skulle være god.
(I have heard that H.C. Andersen should be good)

5. Jeg er bange for, at han en dag skal falde ud af vinduet.
(I fear that he shall one day fall out of the window)

PLEASE NOTICE

Skulle is used for describing transport or, more precisely: The verb describing the transport is left out when you express your plan of going somewhere – unless it is important how the transport is carried out. It is a bit like Tarzan-speak: Me – New York = I am going to New York.

- Jeg skal til Århus. (I am going to Århus)
- Jeg skal sejle til England denne gang. (I will take the boat to England this time).

But *Jeg skal* does not mean *I go*, it means *I have the plan*. This can be seen from the past tense expression:

- *Jeg var i biografen i weekenden.* (I went to the cinema this weekend).
- vs:
- *Jeg skulle i biografen i weekenden* would mean *I had planed to go to the cinema/ I was on my way to the cinema.*

Måtte

Måtte expresses 1) A necessity in the sense: there is no other way out. 2) The only intelligible solution. 3) A permission/prohibition. *Måtte* is subjective and usually has an element of feeling/resistance:

Jeg ville ikke i skole, men min far, sagde jeg skulle, og så måtte jeg gøre det. (This phrase cannot be translated into English without loss of meaning. It would be: I did not want to go to school, but my father said I had to and then I had to.)

1. Min cykel var punkteret, så jeg måtte gå. (My bike had a puncture, so I had to walk.)
2. Du må være Clintons bror, I har præcis den samme næse. (You got to be a brother of Clinton, you have got exactly the same nose.)
3. Du må ikke købe alkohol, før du bliver 16. (you are not allowed to buy alcohol until you turn 16.)

PLEASE NOTICE

Måtte in the meaning of *have to/got to* is asymmetrical: It cannot be used in negative phrases or questions: *Du må ikke hjælpe mig!* can only be a prohibition. (You are not allowed to help me). If you want to say: *You do not need to help me!* a different (modal) verb is used: *at behøve*: *Du behøver ikke at hjælpe mig!*

Necessity can also be expressed with *at være nødt til* (must/have to):

Du er nødt til at lære dansk, hvis du vil bo i Danmark. (You have to learn Danish if you want to live in Denmark).

Kunne

Kunne describes 1) ability, 2) possibility, 3) opportunity or 4) skill:

1. Døren kan låses. (The door can be locked)
2. Han kan komme når som helst. (He may come any minute)
3. Du kan ringe, når vi kommer hjem. (You can call him, when we get home)
4. Jeg kan svømme. (I can swim)

PLEASE NOTICE

It is considered quite rude to ask for permission by using *kunne*, unless the question is a mere formality:

Kan jeg låne din blyant et øjeblik? (May I use your pencil for a moment?)

Burde

Burde is the appeal to a moral or rational authority within you, expressed by *should* or *ought to* in English. Although *burde* exists in past tense it always has a present meaning. 1) Past tense expresses criticism of the present state, while 2) present tense in general terms describes how things should be in an ideal world.

- 1) *Du burde besøge din far lidt oftere.* (You should visit your father a bit more often)
- 2) *Man bør ikke få børn, hvis man ikke har tid til dem.* (One should not have children unless you have the time for them.)

PLEASE NOTICE

Skulle conveys no appeal in Danish, it is just a suggestion.